

# Doctrinal Authority for THE SDA CHURCH

By Maurice Barnett

We have previously looked at the claims of Ellen White to inspiration and what Seventh-day Adventists claim for her. The relation of such a position to the Bible is clearly drawn by them; her inspiration was the *same as the Bible*. The *Adventist Review* of July 15, 1982 carried a one page statement of belief from their ruling body on the inspiration of Ellen White. This was a "revised" statement as of June 14, 1982. Following is one of the statements made:

"We do not believe that the writings of Ellen White may be used as the basis of doctrine."

This statement is purely propaganda. It is subterfuge of the worst sort. In all issues in their Church she is called on to settle the matter. In what has been presented as "The Dallas Statement," the Adventist General Conference, 1980, hammered out their statement of beliefs. Following is statement 17:

"One of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is prophecy. This gift is an identifying mark of the remnant church and was manifested in the ministry of Ellen G. White. As the Lord's messenger, *her writings are a continuing and authoritative source of truth and provide for the church comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction*. They also make clear that the Bible is the standard by which all teachings and experience must be tested."

Note the italicized portion that covers the authority of Ellen White in the areas cited. That most certainly involves doctrinal matters. Francis D. Nichol, in his classic defense of Mrs. White, *Ellen G. White and Her Critics*, says

"Mrs. White's teachings on doctrine are those held by Seventh-day Adventists. Thus the defense of our teachings, as found in our denominational works, is really a defense of Mrs. White, even as it is a defense of the doctrinal soundness of every other person who believes and promotes those beliefs." (p. 16) The acknowledgements page of this book states that it was written under the direction of the Defense Literature Committee whose members were the leading Adventists of the time, including Arthur L. White, grandson of Ellen White, and J.L. McElhany, President of the General Conference from 1936 to 1950. They certainly should have understood what place Ellen White had among Adventists. In the Adventists periodical, *Ministry* of October, 1981, page 8 we note:

"The vast scope of subjects on which she wrote and the fact that she employs or comments on so large a portion of the verses in Scripture make it extremely difficult in practical life to avoid giving her a more important role than any Biblical author in the formation of doctrine. She simply had much more to say on all doctrinal topics than any other inspired writer. Thus if her writings are used to end all doctrinal disputes, it is almost impossible to maintain the Bible as the normative authority for doctrine . . . It is tempting in Ellen White's case to grant her more practical authority than any single Bible writer."

Indeed, in practical application, Ellen White settles all dispute for the Adventist Church. They are scrambling around at present with contradictory positions trying to salvage Ellen White. It's really a losing proposition. Following is a series of quotations from a letter written by Ellen White in January, 1906, to Elder W.W.

Simpson in San Diego. Note the date. This was sixty years of writing. She says:

"The truths given us after the passing of the time in 1844 are just as certain and unchangeable as when the Lord gave them to us in answer to our urgent prayers. The visions that the Lord has given me are so remarkable that we know that what we have accepted is the truth. This was demonstrated by the Holy Spirit. Light, precious light from God, established the main points of our faith as we hold them today . . . At that time one error after another pressed in upon us, and ministers and doctors brought in new doctrines. We would search the Scriptures with much prayer, and the Holy Spirit would bring the truth to our minds. Sometimes whole nights would be devoted to searching the Scriptures, and earnestly asking God for guidance. Companies of earnest, devoted men and women assembled for this purpose. The power of God would come upon me, and I was enabled clearly to define what is truth, and what is error. As the points of our faith were thus established, our feet were placed upon a solid foundation. We accepted the truth point by point, under the demonstration of the Holy Spirit. I would be taken off in vision, and explanations would be given me. I was given illustrations of heavenly things and of the sanctuary, so that we were placed where light was shining on us in clear, distinct rays. *All these truths are immortalized in my writings. The Lord never denies His word.* Men may get up scheme after scheme, and the enemy will seek to seduce souls from the truth, but all who believe that the Lord has spoken through Sister White, and has given her a message, will be safe from the many delusions that will come in these last days . . . The positions taken in my books are truth. The truth was revealed to us by the Holy Spirit . . . I am thankful that the instruction contained in my books establishes present truth for this time. These books were written under the demonstration of the Holy Spirit." Letter 50-1906, White Estate, (italics added).

No clearer statement could be made. Their doctrinal positions came by "visions" of Mrs. White and are "immortalized" in her writings. Her books "establish present truth for this time." Her visions were necessary to discern between truth and error, to determine just what the Scriptures taught. The *Adventist Review* statement of beliefs says: "We do not

believe that Scripture can be understood only through the writings of Ellen White." Yet, she claimed that neither she nor any of the others of her time could understand the Scriptures, discern between truth and error, without her "visions." Further, even in regard to the procedures of their work she insisted on her own way. In a letter of February 2, 1889, venting herself against those who would not follow her counsel, and especially some General Conference decisions that year, she says:

"Another resolution was passed that might have been laid upon the table, i.e. the one in reference to training all licentiates in the canvassing work before permitting them to enter the ministry. This was to be an absolute rule, and notwithstanding all I had to say against this resolution, it was carried. It was not right for the conference to pass it. It was not in God's order, and this resolution *will fall powerless to the ground. I shall not sustain it*, for I would not be found working against God. This is not God's way of working and *I will not give it countenance for a moment.*" Letter 22-1889, White Estate (italics added).

She had to have her way about it, and her way was God's way. She set not only doctrinal positions but procedural ones as well. We next note that she said that Scripture is misapplied if it contradicts anything she wrote:

"It is eloquence for every one to keep silent in regard to the features of our faith in which they acted no part. God never contradicts Himself. Scripture proofs are misapplied if forced to testify to that which is not true. Another and still another will arise and bring in supposedly great light, and make their assertions. But we stand by the old landmarks." *Selected Messages*, Vol. 1, page 162.

"God has given them light, and it is their privilege to cherish the light and to speak of it to strengthen and encourage one another. Brother J. would confuse the mind by seeking to make it appear that the light God has given through the *Testimonies* is an addition to the word of God, but in this he presents the matter in a false light. God has seen fit in this manner to bring the minds of His people to His word, to give them a clearer understanding of it." *Testimonies*, Vol. 4, p. 246.

Of course she could insist that her testimonies were not "an addition to the word of God" because she believed her testimonies *were the word of God*. But notice that only what agrees with her writings is a true interpretation of Scripture. But that's not all. Charles T. Russell, who started the movement that resulted in the Jehovah's Witnesses, insisted that after a person had studied his *Studies in the Scriptures*, and then left them, they would shortly go into darkness. Ellen White made the same claim in different words. Note:

"I know your danger. If you lose confidence in the testimonies you will drift away from Bible truth." *Testimonies*, Vol. 5, p. 98.

"It is Satan's plan to weaken the faith of God's people in the *Testimonies*. Next follows skepticism in regard to the vital points of our faith, the pillars of our position, then doubt as to the Holy Scriptures, and then the downward march to perdition. When the *Testimonies*, which were once believed, are doubted and given up, Satan knows the deceived one will not stop at this; and he redoubles his efforts till he launches them into open rebellion, which becomes incurable and ends in destruction." *Testimonies*, Vol. 4, p. 211.

"The very last deception of Satan will be to make of non effect the testimony of the Spirit of God. 'Where there is no vision, the people perish.' (Prov. 29:18). Satan will work ingeniously, in different ways and through different agencies, to unsettle the confidence of God's remnant people in the true testimony. He will bring in spurious visions to mislead, and will mingle the false with the true, and so disgust people that they will regard everything that bears the name of visions as a species of fanaticism; but honest souls, by contrasting false and true, will be enabled to distinguish them . . ." *Selected Messages*, Vol. 2, p. 78.

Notice how it is necessary to accept her writings in order to stay in the light. If one loses confidence in her writings he will drift away from Bible truth as well; there is no stopping with just the *Bible alone!* The statements clearly show her true feeling that one cannot take just the Bible alone and understand the will of God and serve Him faithfully. It should be clear from these statements

that Ellen White speaks for Adventists on all doctrinal issues. She is the final appeal in any disagreement between them; her statements settle the matter. That is how it worked when she was alive and it is still that way, though we will note in a moment that there are some changes on the horizon.

The *Adventist Review* statement further says, and keep in mind what we've covered so far in relation to it:

"We believe that the acceptance of the prophetic gift of Ellen White, while not a requirement for continuing church membership, is important to the nurture and unity of the Seventh-day Adventist Church."

That's not exactly so. Ellen White is the foundation of the Adventist Church and she permeates every thought, writing and sermon. As a matter of fact, the latest copy of the official Certificate of Baptism that I have contains a list of *Baptismal Vows*, among which the candidate must believe and *sign his name to*:

"I accept the doctrine of spiritual gifts, and believe that the Spirit of prophecy is one of the identifying marks of the remnant church."

The "Spirit of prophecy" is, of course, identifying Ellen White. On the inside of the Certificate is a *Summary of Doctrinal Beliefs*. No. 20 says:

"The church is to come behind in no gift, and the presence of the gift of the Spirit of prophecy is to be one of the identifying marks of the remnant church . . . Seventh-day Adventists recognize that this gift was manifested in the life and ministry of Ellen G. White."

A candidate for baptism must believe in the inspiration of Ellen White, and sign his name to a vow concerning that belief. Note that they say "Seventh-day Adventists recognize . . ." So, *to be an Adventist means that you recognize that Ellen White was an inspired prophetess*. Walter Rea, in his book, prints a letter that was sent out by one Adventist church to all its members. It says in part:

"The Seventh-day Adventist church does not have a creed, but it does have a statement of beliefs that have been adopted as the basis for their existence. The statement of beliefs was reaffirmed at the recent General Con-

ference (1980). More recently, the leaders and scholars adopted a consensus statement which gave strong support to the official church position of teachings regarding the sanctuary and the prophetic ministry of Ellen G. White . . . To preserve unity and to maintain order, the Aurora church must ask that those in positions of leadership and teaching ministry subscribe to the fundamental beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists. If a teacher or leader cannot conscientiously do this at this time, we ask that they voluntarily resign from their office." *The White Lie*, p. 115.

Notice that one of the beliefs that is the "basis for the existence" of the Adventist Church is a belief in the prophetic ministry of Ellen White. That must be maintained and to be a member of that Church is to subscribe to that belief. They may say that the above statement only applies to leaders and teachers, but some sort of pressure is brought against any member not willing to toe the Ellen White line, and it would certainly bar them from any position of leadership. The question must be asked, naturally, that if an Adventist no longer can accept Ellen White's inspiration, *why would they want to remain an Adventist?* Reject her and you must reject the cardinal doctrines that are peculiar to the Church that makes one a Seventh-day Adventist. As Nichol said, "the defense of our teachings, as found in our denominational works, is really a defense of Mrs. White, even as it is a defense of the doctrinal soundness of every other person who believes and promotes those beliefs." The doctrine and Ellen White stand or fall together. This is precisely what many Adventists are awakening to. Remember, Ellen White said, "If you lose confidence in the testimonies you will drift away from Bible truth." No, that isn't so. What they drift away from is Adventist doctrine as taught in the *Testimonies* and other writings of Ellen White. There is a difference between that and the Bible.

However, for the future, an irreversible trend has been set. As new evidence about Ellen White appears, new adjustments must take place in Adventist

explanations. Yet, enough evidence is continuing to come to light to affect profoundly the next generation of Adventists. This is clearly stated by Jonathan M. Butler, Professor of History of Religion at Loma Linda University, a leading Adventist school. An interview with Dr. Butler appears in *Sunstone*, May-June, 1982. Oddly enough, *Sunstone* is a Mormon publication. Butler says:

"Most people in the church try to explain her literary dependence by saying that she selected only the best material, that she edited the best possible anthology. Even this formulation has hardly passed the lips of church leadership when it appears obsolete in the face of new literary findings. She drew from historians in a historical argument, for example, who were not the best among her contemporaries, who held to errors in fact as well as in judgment . . . I imagine Adventists by and large will survive these historical revelations with faith in Mrs. White's inspiration intact, but it will have to be a *different* faith. My children will not grow up on the knee of the same Ellen White I did. She may be more of a grandmother to them than a mother. That is, she will retain an important and respected position in their spiritual heritage, but they will acknowledge, and be untroubled by, their historical distance from her. Already, I notice in the religion classes I teach that a professor cannot clinch an argument with a quotation from Ellen White. Now students want some corroborating evidence, a scientific or historical authority that backs up inspiration. Students are even willing to quarrel with the prophetess on occasion, or contrast her to scripture and favor scripture. This would have been unheard of a decade ago . . . One difficulty for the teacher is meeting the needs of this new generation of students with the older generation eavesdropping on the conversation—members of the Board of Trustees, parents, local ministers whose belief in Ellen White's inspiration cannot work for their children. I think their children will still believe but only on their own terms." (pages 32-33)

In addition to noting the change in climate among younger Adventists, notice what Butler *admits*. He admits that (1) usual, historical, practice would be to end all argument on a subject with a quotation from Ellen White. This

(See ELLEN G. WHITE, page 28)